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GAO's Study of Overseas Department of Defense Dependents' Schools

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Before the
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
and Compensation
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

G.M.
GA 1.5/2:

SUMMARY OF GAO TESTIMONY BY WILLIAM J. GAINER ON GAO'S STUDY OF OVERSEAS DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE DEPENDENTS' SCHOOLS

In the committee report which accompanied the fiscal year 1989 National Defense Authorization Act, the House of Representatives directed GAO to study the strengths and weaknesses of the 269 schools DOD operates for military dependents overseas. During its study, GAO is developing information on the school system's quality of education, organizational structure, drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs, and teacher evaluation systems.

GAO has obtained information on the concerns of parents about the responsiveness of the schools to their concerns.

To date, GAO has (1) developed preliminary information on each of the study objectives and (2) visited the DOD Dependent School's headquarters, its Pacific Regional Office, its Philippine District Office, and the 10 schools located in the Philippines to obtain school data and officials' views and concerns. GAO has also observed the physical condition of the school facilities. GAO will soon expand its work to include Germany, and will continue to assess the information it is developing on the various issues as they pertain to providing education to military dependents.

The information developed on the Philippines' schools indicates that generally teachers are being certified and evaluated as required, and that drug and alcohol abuse programs are being implemented. On the other hand:

-- About 1 in 7 students have graduated from high school without meeting minimum graduation requirements. For example, some were permitted to substitute English as a Second Language or compensatory education for required courses.

-- Teachers' qualification files were often incomplete, although the information may have been available at the time teachers were hired. For example, 37 percent lacked official transcripts, 46 percent lacked evidence that their teaching experience and eligibility had been evaluated, and none contained required professional references.

-- The system for responding to parental concerns may not be fully effective. Although the appropriate school and installation advisory committees were established, the members, which include parents, believed that the committees' roles and responsibilities were unclear, and that their concerns were not given proper attention and resolution.

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our ongoing study of Department of Defense overseas dependents' schools. As you know, we were directed by the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee Report, which accompanied the fiscal year 1989 National Defense Authorization Act, to study the strengths and weaknesses of these DOD-operated schools. As we understand it, this request resulted from the concerns of individuals who described their experiences and views regarding the Department of Defense Dependents' Schools System (DODDS) in field hearings held by your Subcommittee.

BACKGROUND

The DODDS mission is to provide a quality education to eligible minor dependents--from kindergarten through grade 12--of military and DOD civilian personnel on overseas assignments. There were 152,462 students attending 269 dependents' schools in five regions during the 1987-88 school year. The operating budget for these schools was $755 million in fiscal year 1988, about $4,950 per pupil.

STUDY APPROACH AND STATUS

In line with the committee report, the objectives of our study are to:

-- Develop information on the quality of education in DODDS schools, including such indicators as graduation rates; achievement and college aptitude test scores; and teacher qualifications, salaries, and experience.

-- Determine the responsiveness of the school system to parental concerns.

-- Develop information on the status of the system's drug and alcohol abuse prevention and recovery programs.

-- Determine whether appropriate systems are available for the evaluation of curricula, teachers, and administrators.

We are focusing our efforts on the DODDS regions in Germany and the Pacific because (1) these regions include 65 percent of the schools and 75 percent of the students in the system, (2) the concerns generating the Subcommittee's interest surfaced in the Pacific Region, and (3) Germany will provide us with a basis for comparison with the schools in the Pacific.

We conducted our initial work at DOD headquarters; its Pacific Regional Office and Philippine District Office; and the 10 schools located at Clark Air Base, Subic Bay Naval Base, and San Miguel Naval Station. We obtained information on each of the study objectives, including the views and concerns of parents, military personnel, and local school officials on the responsiveness of the system's schools to parental concerns. Because our work has just begun, our information is preliminary and subject to change as we gather and analyze additional data.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Beginning with school year 1987-88, DODDS has set a minimum of 20 completed credits (15 in required subjects plus 5 electives) for students to graduate from high school. (See exhibit.) To see if this requirement was being enforced, we selected a random sample from the 200 students who graduated from the two Philippines high schools during the 1987-88 school year. Our review of their transcripts showed that 1 in 7 of these graduates failed to meet the minimum graduation requirements. The schools permitted seven students to substitute English as a Second Language and

compensatory education courses for the required courses. The schools also permitted three students to graduate by granting full credit for partially completed courses because the principals believed graduation was in the best interest of these students. We plan to review the rationale for these actions.

TEACHER CERTIFICATION

To review teacher certifications, qualifications, and performance appraisals, we also randomly selected 70 of the 270 classroom teachers at the 10 schools in the Phillipines and reviewed their personnel files.

DODDS policies and procedures for ensuring that teachers are qualified and knowledgeable require regional offices to initially certify new teachers and recertify them every 6 years. In order to be recertified, teachers must successfully complete course work appropriate to their subjects. For all but one of our sample of 70 teachers, proof of certification or recertification existed at their schools. The one teacher whose file was missing had recently transferred from Germany and the file had not arrived.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS

To determine teacher qualifications when hiring teachers, DODDS requires an official college transcript, a signed federal employment application with evidence that it has been evaluated to determine that the applicant has the necessary experience, and professional references that provide information regarding the candidate's professional and academic background. DODDS instructions specify that school principals should maintain files related to teachers' qualifications, rather than the services' civilian personnel offices. The files we reviewed at

the schools contained incomplete documentation. For example, 37 percent of the files did not contain official transcripts.

We also found that the files maintained at the civilian personnel office were generally incomplete or inadequate to support whether teachers met minimum employment qualifications. For example,

-- 46 percent lacked evidence that the teachers' employment application had been evaluated to determine that they had the required experience and

-- none of the files contained the required professional references.

It is possible that this information may have been available at the time the teachers were hired and their qualifications were evaluated. However, it was missing when we reviewed the files.

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools--among the largest of the associations that accredit high schools and colleges and the agency hired by DODDS to accredit its schools--reviewed the qualifications of 1,079 teachers in the Pacific region for school years 1986-87 and 1987-88. It identified 20 teachers (2 percent) who did not meet DODDS minimum qualifications standards. However, 11 of these individuals no longer teach in DODDS schools, and the others have made up their deficiencies or been reassigned to teach another subject for which they were qualified.

TEACHER EVALUATIONS

DODDS regulations require that supervisors provide a performance appraisal plan, containing 3 to 5 critical elements, to employees at the start of the rating period, and that supervisors meet with

employees at the end of the rating period for a performance review. The Pacific Regional Office requires a documented mid-year progress review for each employee.

While program regulations prescribe the procedures for evaluating the performance of employees, individual school principals generally establish the specific performance standards. In the Philippines, the district office instituted performance standards for teachers because, according to the superintendent, the standards set by the principals were too general.

Our review of teacher performance appraisals showed that they were generally completed as required. In every case, the principals provided the teachers with an opportunity to participate in the review of the performance appraisal plan at the start of the rating period, and met with teachers at the end of the rating period. On the other hand, 24 percent of the teachers' appraisals we reviewed did not show evidence of a mid-year progress review as required by the DODDS Pacific Region.

RESPONSIVENESS TO PARENTAL CONCERNS

Defense Department procedures provide for establishing both school and installation advisory committees to provide advice to school principals and installation commanders on matters related to school affairs. These committees also provide a means to address and resolve problems and concerns at the school level, before elevation to the district or region. The school committees advise principals on matters concerning school policies, programs, and resources, while the installation committees recommend and advise the installation commander regarding support--such as transportation and school meals--provided by the military services to dependents' schools serving that installation.

Under DOD procedures, if a committee cannot resolve an issue with a principal or commander, it can put its concern in writing and refer it to the district or region until some resolution is reached.

All schools in the Phillipines have school advisory committees. In addition, installation advisory committees have been established at Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base. Although commanders are required to attend installation advisory committee meetings and act as a communication link between the committee and the military chain of command on school matters, in practice they often send a representative. These representatives have frequently failed to attend the committee meetings. For example, in school year 1987-88, the Subic representative did not attend four of the five meetings, and the Clark representative did not attend at three of the six meetings, although a substitute attended one. According to installation advisory committee members, very little was accomplished when these representatives did not attend the meetings because there was no communication link with the military.

We met with parents and teachers who are members of the school advisory committees to obtain their opinions on the effectiveness of the committees. According to some of these members, DODDS administrators have not always satisfactorily responded to parent and teacher concerns. Thus, these parents and teachers believe that although the committees can raise issues, these issues are often not resolved to their satisfaction.

Members of the school and installation committees said they have not expressed their unresolved concerns in writing because they were not aware this avenue was available to them. They believed that training of all advisory committee members, rather than only the chairperson, would enable them to better understand the

opportunities available for influencing school policies, programs, and resources.

Although DODDS does not require members to receive training on school and installation advisory committee operations, the Pacific Region has provided training to school committee chairpersons during the past 2 years. According to the chairpersons, the training gave them a better understanding of the procedures, but should have included other committee members. DODDS officials said that they have recently sent training tapes to each school describing the functions of advisory committees.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE PREVENTION

During school year 1987-88, DODDS implemented drug use prevention programs in all grades. One program, referred to as "Here's Looking at You, 2000," is for kindergarten through grade eight and provides students with information on how to resist drugs. It also includes a component for parental involvement. Another program, the "Together" program, for grades 9 through 12, is an alcohol-drug education program which includes developing skills in decisionmaking, managing stress, coping with and solving problems, and developing a positive self image. The Pacific Region implemented these two programs primarily by training teams of teachers, counselors, nurses, and administrators at the regional office.

For example, during school year 1987-88, teams of three to five teachers received training on "Here's Looking At You, 2000" from program developers. The consultants trained 130 teachers, nurses, counselors, and administrators at four training sites. The teams then returned to their schools and implemented the program. The teams also conducted school-wide training and parent and community awareness presentations.

SCHOOL FACILITIES

We visited the 19 DODDS schools located on Okinawa and in the Philippine Islands to observe the physical condition of the school facilities. The most recent accreditation reports showed facilities weaknesses--such as inadequate classroom space and safety hazards--at 17 of the 19 schools (2 newly built schools are to be evaluated for the first time in school year 1988-89). During our school visits, we observed the actions taken to correct the facilities' "weaknesses" noted in these reports.

At the time of our visits, we observed that all the identified weaknesses had been corrected at 5 schools, but only about half had been corrected at the other 12. In some cases, the schools have submitted requests to the military for the repair of the facilities or have allocated funds for repairs, although the repairs are yet to be made. In other instances, no actions had been initiated to correct the weaknesses. The severity of these weaknesses varied from minor repairs for gym floors to inadequate air purification systems in workshop and crafts areas.

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As we continue our review, we will attempt to determine the extent to which the factors described here may be affecting the education provided to military dependents. We will also obtain certain indicators of education quality, such as aptitude and achievement test scores and teacher-pupil ratios. We plan to begin our work in Germany this month, and will review regional and district offices and school activities as we did in the Pacific Region.

Madam Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. My colleagues and I will be pleased to answer any questions you and other members of the Subcommittee may have.

EXHIBIT

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DODDS GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Required Areas	Units
Language Arts	4
Social Studies	3
Mathematics	2
Science	2
Career Education	1
Aesthetics	1
Physical Education	1
Health	1/2
Computer Science	1/2
Electives	5
Total	**20**